

# TIPS 4

# SQUATTING



IN NYC

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A group of people, of varying ages and skills decide that they have had enough of the shelter system, enough of the humiliation, injustice and dehumanization of being homeless, or they simply can no longer afford the rip off rents that eat up most of the money they have. Getting together, they decide to consider a direct action approach to securing a home here in New York City. They decide to take matters into their own hands. They meet, get acquainted, discuss, gain each other's trust, and start to explore the possibilities.

Spotting a vacant building in (for example) the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the former neighborhood of a number of the groups members, they decide to explore one particular building that according to the locals has been empty for some time, evidenced by the fact that the notices and garbage strewn in front of the place are months or even years old. The place looks and feels dormant. Checking it out from the street, but not being too obvious, they decide that all in all it looks good from the outside, and that the immediate neighborhood looks OK as well. Squatting works best in neighborhoods that are relatively peaceful, where gentrification, police and hungry developers are only moderately, minimally (if at all) present. In other words, successful homesteading is more feasible on let's say Atlantic Avenue, East New York, than it is on Park Avenue or areas coveted by the greed mongers.

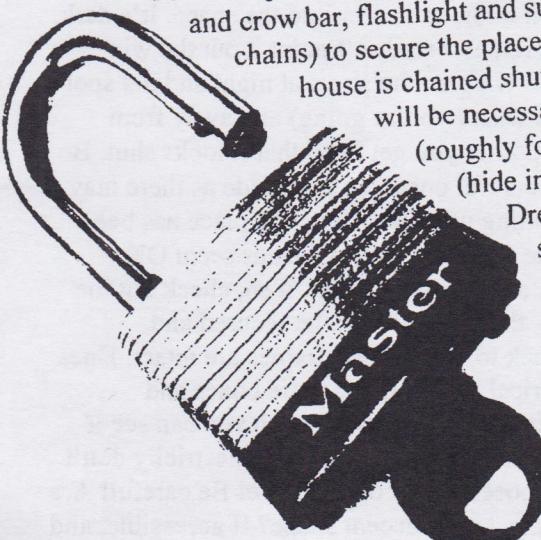
Next, your group ascertains the exact address of the vacant building. If the address is not immediately visible, they take note of the next-door address and figure it out. Point is, by whatever means, you need to ascertain the exact address of the house. Once having done so, locate a computer and type in the following address: <http://webapps.nyc.gov:8084/CICS/fin1/find001i>

This is the NYC Department of Real Property, "property search" link. Explore all they give you here, especially the name and address of the current owner along with the owner's office address, if available. Others knowledgeable in this area of research may direct you to other on-line means of securing this type of information, information that may become useful (necessary) later if you need to convince the "owner" to leave you be. If you can't decipher some of the coded lingo, find some trustworthy person who can.

Also make inquiries of the local residents, though don't tip your hand regarding your plans. Suggest, in your hob-nobbing, that you're only interested in the history of the building or are checking it out for your boss, writing a term paper, or you work with a homeless group that wants to buy it etc. or some such BS. These conversations with locals can sometimes get you info not available on-line, more current and real, like has anyone been going in and out recently, any worker types, suits etc. The locals will know this sort of stuff ... how long the house has been vacant etc. Just be careful who you talk to and most def do not suggest your plan to occupy with anyone but your group of trusted fellow homesteaders. Remember, "loose lips sink ships."

Once your group has a pretty good idea who owns the house, and that it has been vacant for a significant amount of time, is tied up with some bank, absentee landlord, etc. that doesn't seem to be doing anything with it, you can move to the next step: A small group of two to four persons enter into the vacant building / house clandestinely (secretly), preferably through a rear or side entrance or (basement) window or door. If none available, then through the front door at a suitable time, utilizing spotters on the street. THE PRIMARY LAW HERE IS SECRECY! Getting busted at this stage is not the end of the world but quite possibly means you have to give up on that particular site for a while.

To do the job your group will need a good bolt cutter, pry bar and crow bar, flashlight and sufficient hard-ware (locks and chains) to secure the place when you're done. If the house is chained shut, bolted and/or boarded up it will be necessary to use the bolt-cutter (roughly four feet tall) and hefty crow bar (hide in old guitar case) to get in.



Dress in dark cloths, wear hard soled shoes. Days before, explore the block late at night and early morning (after 3 AM). Decide, based on this scouting, when is the best time to go in. Scout it out, see whose around etc. Don't hang out in front of the place, but

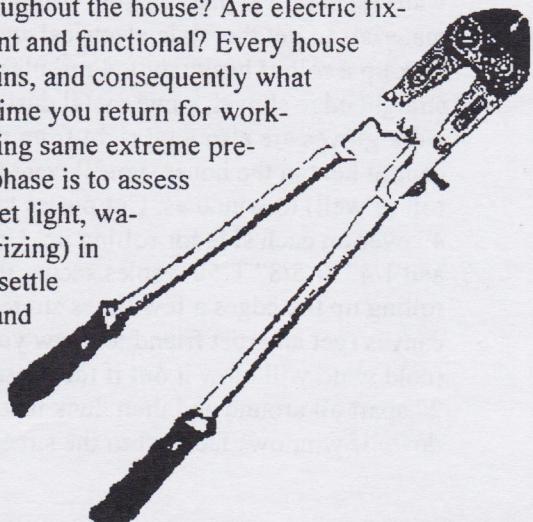
across the street! Don't draw attention to yourself! Be cagey, remember, it's about doing things under the radar!

When you're checking out the site, sit on a stoop across the street, hang on the corner etc. and watch for what happens. Note how often the police cruise by. Is there a local yokel that hangs out in front all night, and so on. In most instances, best time to go in is 3-5 AM, but that depends on the block. Sometimes a block with a lot of daily business as usual, hot Friday night buzz kind of activity can provide a more suitable cover for entrance. You be the judge when it's best to go in, and where the best and most covert point of entry might be and what tools to bring to make the job go smoothly and swiftly (don't be lugging stuff with you that you don't need). When you do decide to move, post one or two people outside, across the street, on the corner etc. as spotters with cell phones so that if anything weird or un-towards takes place they can call you and give you a heads up. This is especially useful when you are ready to come out! You don't want to suffer the misfortune of bumping right into a cop strolling down the street, or double-parked in front of the Dunkin Donuts on your way out, so best to get an "all clear" call from outside before you make your exit and lock the place up using the hardware (new lock, chain etc.) that you brought for that purpose.

Going In: OK, you and a friend or two (max), one of you with some basic construction skills, snap the chain, pry open a side basement or ground floor window, a back door, and enter into the space. It's dark, so you use your flashlight, but remember, don't point it out the windows or any cracks that will show up on the street at night and get spotted, focus flashlight down (see where you're going) and away from windows. Close the opening up after you get in so that it looks shut. Be quiet!! Proceed cautiously, be careful once you are inside as there may be holes in the floor etc, depending upon how long the place has been vacant. Check structure: Do the floor and ceiling beams seem OK, floors level (not on major tilt), are the stairs intact, if so, check out the upper floors, check windows – they will need to be secured and "winterized" eventually so check to see if wood frames are intact. Does the house appear to have electrical wiring in place (ie boxes and switches still on the wall)? Bring an electrical tester so you can see if there's juice anywhere. If you don't know much about electricity don't be touching things ... some exposed lines could be live! Be careful! Are the walls made of sheet rock, plaster, in decent shape? If accessible, and stairs are functional, check the roof, what shape is it in, are there large

holes resulting in persistent water damage to the building? The reason you're checking all this is that your group is making a list of the materials and skills necessary that you will need when next you return, figuring where you are going to get the materials, the cash, the skills to do the job. Now remember, a one or two family, one or two year old foreclosed home is going to appear a lot less damaged than a six floor tenement walk-up water damaged building that's been empty for a decade and open to the elements! So expect varying conditions depending upon the venue you're checking out.

Other key stuff to look for: Is the building / house structurally safe ie. not going to come crashing down on your head? In other words, are there obvious cracks in the exterior walls, radically slanted floors (beams are sagging) etc? If so, you may want to move to another site or plan on doing major amounts of work to bring the house up to a standard that is not a threat to life and limb! If the house seems OK, figure out how much material (plywood and 2 x 4s) you will need to secure the space on your next trip(s) back to the building. Remember, you got in - so you want to insure that no one else can. So for the time being, 3/4 inch plywood (4'x8') and 2 x 4s are the best bet for ground floor, lower floor window seal-up. Decide which of the ways in is going to be your principle means of entrance during the early stages of occupation / renovation. Plan for how to lock that entrance once you exit (chain and lock etc.). While inside, make a list of the materials that you will need to secure the space and get the electrical and water going. If uncertain, make sure you bring your plumber and electrician friend next time. She/he can check in the basement for electric meters and breaker boxes. Are they intact and usable? Is the water main cut-off accessible? Are waste lines and water feeds intact throughout the house? Are electric fixtures intact? Sinks, toilets present and functional? Every house will vary in terms of what remains, and consequently what you will have to acquire. Each time you return for work-days, go in the same way, utilizing same extreme precautions etc. Basic goal at this phase is to assess the amount of work needed to get light, water, security and warmth (winterizing) in the place to allow for people to settle there. You'll need both skilled and not-so-skilled people to knock out the work, work to be done (at this stage) all in secret! Rome wasn't built in a day and



neither will your squat home. That's OK ... The goal is to get settled and secure and commence working on it ...

Now, the issue of how much work needs to get done before someone can live there depends on one, the condition of the house and two, the degree of need (desperation) on the part of someone (family) who is homeless. If the issue is to get in quick, then do so. If you have some time to renovate first then do so. It will depend on your group and it's needs and desires.

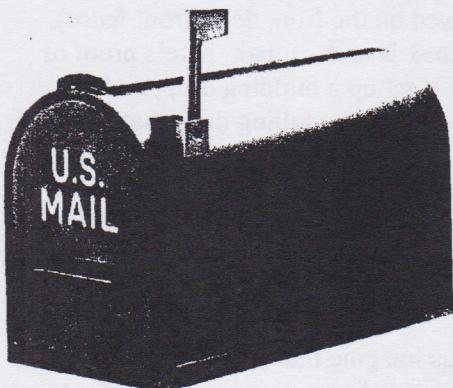
Once securing the space is complete and the lower floor windows and doors are ply-wooded shut and your new lock is put on the point of entry (whether or not it's in the front), choose one apartment or room as a base of operations, "winterize" it and move in!! Money for materials can be raised by everyone pitching in, doing benefits, bake sales, robbing banks! (only kidding) Also, dumpster diving construction sites for materials and getting bruised stuff from commercial lumber yards / builder's shops. Yes, go ask 'em. Very often they will give away what they can't sell and will tell you when to come and pick-up. Through various means you can locate the materials you need to renovate your house and figure ways to get the skills to do the job. Everyone can learn, so if a friend or member of your group can use a screw gun, they can teach you as well. One of the big lies is that the people can't renovate the homes they need. That's BS ... There's nothing that you can't learn to do when it comes to making a home.

Materials you'll need early on: Besides basic materials to repair walls (sheet rock, plaster, joint compound and assorted hardware), and materials to get the basic electrical and plumbing going, you'll want to pick up a roll of heavy duty 4 mil plastic construction garbage bags. A straight edge shovel, some metal dust-pans, dust masks, brooms and work gloves are also vital right from the start. Assuming there is no central heat in the house, you'll want to staple 4 mil plastic (comes in a roll as well) to windows. Cut pieces to size with a carpet knife leaving 4" over on each side for rolling up. Utilizing a heavy duty staple gun and 1/4" or 5/8" T-50 staples secure the plastic to the window frame rolling up the edges a few times stretching and stapling as you would a canvas (get an artist friend to show you how). Secure plastic firmly (cold wind will blow it out if too loose) to all the windows with staples 2" apart all around and then duck tape the entire perimeter of the window. If windows face out to the street, you might want secure with sta-

ples an opaque (can't see through) blanket so that no light can be seen from outside (also helps to keep the heat in).

Now, presuming you don't have a functioning toilet yet, and you and your group are needing to squat immediately, you will want to arrange for a temporary means of "relieving yourselves." Obviously, make use of public accommodations when you can (bathrooms in restaurants, libraries, friend's homes, showers in gyms etc.), but you will want to have some means of taking care of business at night. Joint compound buckets work quite nicely. One for #1 and one for #2. Liquid can be covered with plastic cover and emptied at the corner sewer (discreetly) and cleaned out with bleach and water. Try not to let them get too full as they can become heavy and fermented and emptying makes for a smelly spectacle on Main Street. As for #2, line said bucket with a plastic bag, do your business, knot the bag and discard in garbage can on the street. Top your compound bucket with a toilet seat for a more comfortable experience all around. Lastly, "piss buckets" have at times been utilized in defense of squatters facing eviction.

Heat one small room or area at first, which your group can use as a base of operations, for sleeping, cooking on hotplate etc. Of course, this all relies on a minimum of electric current. This will be available either from lucking out and having live juice in the house, or having the juice turned on (legally or otherwise), running a line from a friendly source (next door neighbor), or tapping it directly from the street light-pole. Your electrician member or friend can advise you. As for the neighbor (only if it's absolutely necessary to let them know what you are doing), tell them that you're occupying the vacant space next to theirs because you need a home. Also state the truth that vacant spaces can sometimes be dangerous sites for drug activity and criminal behav-



ior which threatens everyone in the neighborhood, and also that (might appeal to some residents) that depopulating a neighborhood of poor and working people is usually followed by gentrification of the neighborhood so that your inhabiting the space and creating an affordable living environment lessens the pressure of speculation and is fighting gentrification. By taking the prop-

erty off the market for the condo-izers you're doing the community a service! Tell them that squatting is the antidote to gentrification. You just have to figure a way to make that case. Hopefully, your neighbor, who you are asking to run you an electrical line (extension cord) for a while, understands this.

So you have your lock on the door, possibly some basic electric and water, it's critical that the group begin to stay, establish residency in the space (even if all in one room to start) and protect the place, organize itself, have regular meetings, set basic rules of the homestead, have work days, bring in new people if the space requires it, pool resources, and so on. As part of your practical occupation and homesteading of the space, you want to establish legal residency in your new home. By that is meant that you will need to be able to prove that you, your family, your housemates actually live there should someone dispute your claim. All cities have means by which one establishes legal residency in a space. In NYC, you can establish a legal basis for a claim of residency through the continuous receipt of mail in your name at that site for 30 days or more. In other words, if you can show that you have been residing in a place for 30 days or more through the receipt of mail, you must be accorded due process in any attempt to evict you, you have to be taken to court and evicted by the owner, and not subjected to NYPD rousting as a trespasser. When does your group start this process? The sooner the better! In other words, as early as your group's first "crack" entrance into the space, following your having researched it etc. you'll want to start sending mail to yourself there.

How do you acquire that "resident" status? By having mail sent to you at your new home. As I said, start doing this at the earliest point in the process outlined so far. How do you pick it up? Either use (install quietly) a mail-box out front (tacked on the front door, front fence), meet the mailman with "our mailbox is under repair, here's proof of who I am, can I have my mail?" Or set up a building drop, under the building's address at the local post office by telling them that your mailboxes are being renovated (which is true) so the entire building's occupants needs to pick up mail there. However you arrange it, you want to start collecting mail in your name at that address, ASAP!



Let us imagine that one day some disgruntled passer-by spots you and decides to pre-

vail upon the local cop, just walking by on his beat. By showing your mail, "you see I live here," mail with your name and the address of the place, and clearly postmarked for at least 30 days prior, the "30 day law" as it is known takes effect, and in most cases, the cop will move along and leave you be. Remember, the local cop has one job in confronting you at your doorstep, and that is to determine if you are a trespasser or a resident. That's it. He or she is not there to throw you out unless they have been given an order to do so or they determine you are a trespasser. The NYPD police regulations require the officer to determine if you are a legal resident in the house. By showing her/him your mail you make their job easy. Even if they are suspicious, the mail doesn't lie and they assume it's up to the owner to deal with you, who they may or may not even contact (probably not) after they move on. Often the "30 day law" (you showing your mail) allows the cops to wash their hands of it. It's up to the owner to evict you (if that's their aim) by way of "due process," in other words, through the courts.

Now, the so-called "30 day law" is the ONLY legal defense in NYC that squatters can rely on in the early days of their occupation. Thin? Yes, but it has served the NYC squatter community well over the years. But, in order to get to that stage you have to receive and be in possession of mail for at least a month at the site, and remember, for the first month or two you are going in and out secretly!

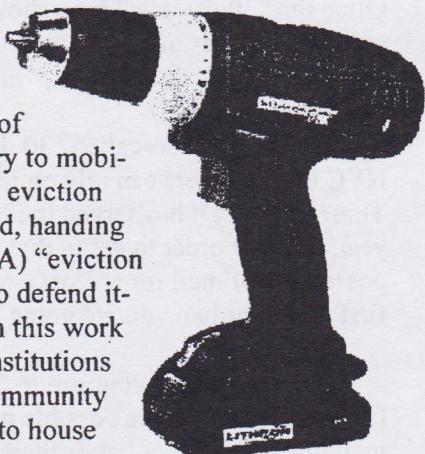
So, you and your group must arrange for receiving this mail by (as I said) one of three possible means (all which require you to send mail to yourselves or have others do so, subscribe to free stuff etc): Either secure (without great fanfare) a mail box on the outside of your new home for the mail person to put stuff in (if there's one already there make sure it looks inviting to the mail person, clean it up, put the house number on it), meet the mail person on the corner (show her/him proof) and ask for your mail given that "your building is being worked on and you have no mail box," or have the local post office hold mail for your building which you and your group can pick up given that your house "is under construction and mailboxes are in repair." However you arrange it, you must facilitate having mail sent to you at your new address in order to utilize it in a claim of residency at that address should this become necessary, and it must be dated minimum 30 days prior.

While all of this is going on, the collecting of mail, the securing of the building from within, the work of getting electric and water going and winterizing the space, IN SECRET, (you want to remain secret un-

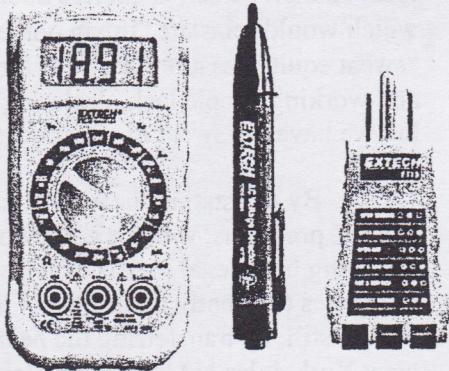
til you have at least a month or so worth of mail) a local "eviction watch" group is being formed in the neighborhood of your new home. It's hard to work on the space and do this community organizing work, so ideally others are doing it for you, but you may have to take some of this on yourselves. Essentially, you're building local support for your occupation by growing a list of people who live in the vicinity of the new squat (but don't know the precise address of your home) who support more generally your right to a home through direct action in principle and are willing to sign on and agree to come out and support you in the event of an eviction attempt. The local "rapid response" to any shenanigans on the part of the alleged "owner" is organized and spearheaded by this local "eviction watch" group which ideally is linked to a city wide network of like minded people who support the human rights struggle for a home.

As was stated, "eviction watch" is concerned with developing a local, "rapid response network" in defense of your home should it become necessary to mobilize your neighbors in the event of an eviction attempt. Canvassing the neighborhood, handing out and posting fliers (see Appendix A) "eviction watch" organizes the neighborhood to defend itself. Some of the activists involved in this work are also focused on particular local institutions in the neighborhood, others on the community orgs and centers, others going house to house to galvanize neighbors, many of whom may

fear for their own homes and who too see the light, recognizing that the strongest local force is the power of neighbors banding together to fight the displacement, rampant speculation and gentrification poor communities have and continue to suffer, people who realize they we can succeed in preventing our becoming just another bunch of victims of the real estate game is to band together and organize and defend those who have taken direct action or a home! An important ally in the community are the religious leaders. They can be asked to sign a statement (Appendix B) that supports the moral right to occupy vacant spaces for a home and agree to come out to defend the occupants when asked to. Artists can design posters and other means of expressing the vision and grit of the new homesteaders in the neighborhood, expressing such sentiments as "we may be homeless but we're not helpless!" or "foreclose on the banks," or posters which call for "a moratorium on evictions."



One afternoon, after having been in the house for two or three months, been collecting mail and making repairs, the group goes "public" and begins using the front door, inevitably smoking out the owner. Yes, sooner or later they are gonna figure out you and your group are there! One day there's a loud knock at the front door. Standing there is some bureaucrat from the bank that claims to own your house. Temporarily removing the barricade you constructed, you make the determination that it's OK to open the door and speak with him (noticing no police etc.) Telling him that you can't let him in without a warrant (which is your right) he proceeds nonetheless to announce that you have no right to be there blah, blah, blah ...



Failing to convince the bank to let you and your family homestead the house and unable to reach a settlement, upon which the banker says he is going to move to evict you and your squatter comrades, you decide to mobilize the names and contacts garnered through the "eviction watch" process and call for a peaceful picket in front of the bank. Non-violent, respectful with press statements and media spokes-people picked out beforehand, colorful banners and posters, the presence of professors and local politicians, you and they make the public case to the assembled media that housing is a human right and yes, although you entered into the vacant premises in an un-permitted way, you only sought to protect yourself and loved ones from the violence pursuant to a life of homelessness (which is the real crime) and further, that the bank had no right to demonize your actions when they have themselves defrauded and victimized thousands through deceptive lending practices etc etc etc, and that they are the real criminals, not people courageously exercising their human right to a home.

At the peaceful protest in front of the bank that's trying to evict your homestead you have Professor Peabody speak about the concept of land trusts and other forms of community based and "mutual" housing, a campaign in which (according to the professor) "the squatters are leading the way." He also makes note of the long and colorful and history of the American homesteader movement. After the professor, the

local council person is queried about her support for Intro 88, a bill which would reinstate "urban homesteading" and give credence to "sweat equity" as a replacement for financial equity which many poor and working people lack, declaring that "we may not have much money but we have the sweat of our brow to make a home!"

By reinstating these kinds of "urban homesteading" and "sweat equity" programs, which existed up until the mid-1980s in NYC, we can bring back legal means of folks entering into and renovating vacant properties (presently thousands of them) all over town. In fact, going further still, by transferring the nearly one billion dollars that the City of New York doles out to the homeless industrial complex each year and utilizing those misspent funds on the renovation of the thousands of vacant units throughout the city, the homeless population of NYC could be housed, with subsidies and services required to shepherd a brutalized population (mostly women and children!) and in need of healing. The realization that it would be far cheaper to house the homeless through the renovation of already available vacant houses than it is to shelter the homeless in a system of control, degradation and disempowerment (to say the least), is the realization that the system as it exists presently is designed to keep homeless people homeless, to keep the poor and increasingly the working classes destabilized and disempowered, by means of lack of stable and affordable housing. Why? Well maybe because stability in housing provides the people with a stable base from which to organize around other issues like health care, education, peace ... Bottom line: Homelessness and the threat of loss of home is an act of state repression designed to disorganize the people who are thereby incapable of mounting campaigns to redress the myriad grievances that exist in our communities. Homelessness as it exists in poor communities of color is a form of counterinsurgency against the poor seeking to pre-empt their (our) ability to organize for change. In fact, given the deleterious and debilitating health effects of being homeless, one could argue that homelessness is a slow motion genocide directed against people of color.

So, still out front of the bank, demanding that they leave you alone to make a home for yourselves, it's always reassuring to know, despite the good intentions and working class bias of most of the NYPD, that movement attorneys are present with us at these protests and at the site of any attempts to evict us. And when they are not busy in that regard they are coming up with novel ways and means of pushing forward and defending those engaged in the human right struggle for housing though

direct action, or squatting.

As luck would have it, surrounded by hundreds of your supporters and shamed by critical and truthful media, the bank backs down and decides to "allow" you and the rest of your homesteader family to remain in your home (and the ten other bank houses that other autonomous squatter groups have occupied.) The months and years pass, and maintaining a regular, non-sexist, non-racist, democratic means of decision making, pulling off effective work days and getting things done, and building true community with your housemates and your neighborhood community, your home becomes a model and inspiration for others who spread the gospel of squatting, the gospel of the right to a home actualized through self-determination and direct action, the moral equivalent of loving your neighbor and yourself.

Appendix A: [Sample Flier to build local Eviction Watch Network.  
Feel free to change – and don't forget to translate when appropriate ...  
the goal is to grow your list of “rapid responsees”]

## *If Housing is a Human Right, Why are so many People Homeless?*



Recently displaced families who are tired of suffering the indignity and violence of being homeless have decided to occupy a vacant house in this neighborhood with the aim of fixing it up for a home.

We need your support.

We are hard working and decent people who may be homeless but are not helpless who believe that vacant housing should be made available to those in need and willing to work to fix them up.

If we are forced to confront the banks and speculators who are destroying our community, who my try to evict us, we are asking you:

*Will you stand with us?*

If so, please contact us (phone and email) and we will notify you in the event of an attempt to evict us.

Thank you so much ... (Name of your local homesteader group)

**Appendix B:** [Statement to be signed by Religious Leaders ... ask them to sign and maintain a communication with them in the event of trouble you can call them out ... and maybe they have congregants that need homes and are willing to work with you to open up new houses!]

*"I am aware that there are many who wince at a distinction between property and persons - who hold both sacrosanct. My views are not so rigid. A life is sacred. Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how much we surround it with rights and respect, it has no personal being. It is part of the earth man walks on; it is not man."*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

## **RELIGIOUS LEADERS SUPPORT OCCUPATION OF VACANT PROPERTY BY HOMELESS PEOPLE**

We, the undersigned, religious leaders comprising diverse aspects of the spiritual community of New York City, after prayerful consideration of the plight of homeless women, children and men, hereby affirm with compassion and determination that,

Whereas, thousands of men, women and children living here in New York City are suffering the injustice, hardship and indignities of being homeless, and

Whereas, there are presently thousands of abandoned and warehoused apartments sitting vacant in our city, and

Whereas, we as religious leaders are united around the commonly held tenets of faith which declare the moral ideal and requirement of loving our neighbors as a means of loving God, and

Whereas, the municipal authorities of New York City have shown themselves to be both unwilling and unable to meet the needs of homeless people, and to renovate and make available these warehoused apartments for those in need, and

Whereas, the poor and those deprived of a place to live and raise their families look to the religious leaders for moral leadership, hope and inspiration as a sign of God's justice,

We hereby declare our support for the actions of homeless people in their direct occupation of these vacant spaces in order to renovate them and to create homes for themselves, and in doing so incarnating the inherent and God-given human right to a home.

In the name of the God of Love and Justice, we hereby affix our signatures below:

Name and Affiliation:

Contact:  
(Add your local contact)

## For More Information:

- Organizing for Occupation [www.o4onyc.org](http://www.o4onyc.org)
- Picture The Homeless: [www.picturethehomeless.org](http://www.picturethehomeless.org)
- NYC property information map: [www.oasisnyc.net/map.aspx](http://www.oasisnyc.net/map.aspx)

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